BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5451 JANUARY 16, 1978
DOUG ROBERTS/CAIRO

EGYPT-ISRAEL RECAP

ANNCR:

CRUCIAL POLITICAL TALKS ON THE MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT OPEN TUESDAY (JAN 17) IN JERUSALEM. VOA CORRESPONDENT DOUG ROBERTS REVIEWS THE HECTIC SERIES OF MID-EAST EVENTS OF THE PAST TWO MONTHS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM CAIRO.

VOICE:

WHEN PRESIDENT SADAT TOLD THE PEOPLES' ASSEMBLY HERE LAST NOVEMBER NINTH THAT HE WAS WILLING TO GO TO ISRAEL TO UNDERSCORE HIS COMMITMENT TO PEACE, VERY FEW OBSERVERS TOOK HIM SERIOUSLY. ONE EUROPEAN DIPLOMAT CALLED THE PRESIDENT'S REMARK POSTURING, AND THE DEAN OF AMERICAN CORRESPONDENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST WAGERED A BOTTLE OF WHISKEY THAT MISTER SADAT WOULD N O T MAKE THE TRIP.

AT THE TIME OF THAT FIRST HINT OF A JERUSALEM VISIT, MOST OF THE MIDDLE EAST PRESS CORPS WAS ASSEMBLED IN TUNIS FOR WHAT TURNED OUT TO BE A SURPRISINGLY HARMONIOUS AND ROUTINE MEETING OF ARAB FOREIGN MINISTERS. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THOSE TALKS WOULD HAVE HAD ANY MAJOR IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE EAST SITUATION IN ANY EVENT. BUT SUDDENLY THEY WERE ALL BUT FORGOTTEN -- WITH THE SHOCKING REALIZATION THAT MISTER SADAT WAS REALLY GOING TO JERUSALEM.

THE PUNDITS HAVE SAID IT ALL: THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT WAS AN EVENT THAT COMPLETELY CHANGED THE PICTURE IN THIS WAR TORN REGION. AND IT HARDLY SEEMS LIKELY THAT ANY MIDDLE EAST MEETING WILL BE CONSIDERED ROUTINE FOR SOME TIME TO COME.

ISRAELIS HAVE WANDERED THE STREETS OF CAIRO, AND EGYPTIANS HAVE BEEN ON GUIDED TOURS OF ISRAELI-HELD JERUSALEM. PRESIDENT SADAT DESERVED A REST AFTER WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN THE AWESOME STRAIN OF HIS HISTORIC JOURNEY. NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE HASN'T

HAD IT. IN ADDITION TO HIS TWO MEETINGS WITH PREMIER BEGIN -- IN JERUSALEM AND ISMAILIA -- THE EGYPTIAN LEADER HAS MET WITH SEVEN OTHER WORLD LEADERS, INCLUDING PRESIDENT CARTER, IN PAST FIFTY EIGHT DAYS. AND HE HAS DIRECTED EGYPTIAN EFFORTS IN THE CRUCIAL NEGOTIATIONS THAT BEGAN IN CAIRO DECEMBER FOURTEENTH AND ARE N O W CONTINUING BOTH HERE AND IN JERUSALEM.

THE FRENETIC PACE OF EVENTS HAS EXHAUSED OFFICIALS AND NEWSMEN ALIKE. BUT OVERALL, PERVADES A SENSE OF HISTORY. THIS IS SO EVEN IN THE ARAB CAPITALS SHARPLY OPPOSED TO PRESIDENT SADAT'S MOVES. THERE IS A CLEAR CUT POPULAR FEELING THAT THE MIDDLE EAST HAS ENTERED A NEW ERA. BOTH EGYPTIAN AND ISRAELI OFFICIALS HAVE GONE OUT OF THEIR WAY TO STRESS THAT THERE WILL BE DIFFICULTIES, EVEN MOMENTS OF CRISIS, IN THE NEGOTIATIONS.

THERE ARE BOTH SKEPTICS AND OPTIMISTS AMONG EGYPTIAN OFFICIALDOM. ISRAEL JUST ISN'T RESPONDING ADEQUATELY TO OUR INITIATIVE, SAID ONE CAIRO OFFICIAL. BUT HE AGREED WITH ANOTHER WHO SAID EGYPT HAS INVESTED TOO MUCH IN THE PEACE PROCESS TO LET IT GO TO WASTE AT THIS STAGE.

THE EUPHORIA THAT BLOSSOMED HERE DESPITE ONE OF THE COLDEST WINTERS IN YEARS, HAS BEEN TONED DOWN SOMEWHAT IN RECENT WEEKS, WITH THE REALIZATION THAT THE PEACE PROCESS IS NOT GOING TO BE SPEEDY. BUT THERE IS NO INDICATION THAT PRESIDENT SADAT HAS LOST THE CONFIDENCE OF HIS PEOPLE. CLEARLY, THE VAST MAJORITY OF EGYPTIANS ARE FIRMLY BEHIND THEIR PRESIDENT. AND JUST AS CLEARLY, EGYPTIAN LEADERS ARE DETERMINED TO PUSH AHEAD WITH THEIR EFFORTS DESPITE SHARP CRITICISM FROM SOME OF THEIR ERSTWHILE ARAB ALLIES AND DESPITE THE THORNY PROBLEMS THAT REMAIN IN THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH ISRAEL.

JS/PBM